1: Messing E-5 (1953-1954)1957 MPS Amhara MPS

PART IV : The Life Cycle of the Individual

561

Like many other societies with a tradition-directed culture, the individual passing through the age-grades of life is taught well in advance what his duties and privileges are at each stage.

The age-grades, though strongly emphasized in Amhara human relationships, are not as detailed nor as sharply divided from each other as in the case of the Galla of Southern Ethiopia (the "gada" age grades).

[854] The two-year breast-feeding period is the happiest of the stages for the baby. Infancy and childhood, for both sexes, are carefree periods of experimentation, which is sharply abrogated as adolescence, a period of authoritarian obedience, approaches.

[582] Even the first marriage of an individual, taking place at the very beginning of adulthood (even earlier for girls), permits only a

[586 minimum of individual choice. Unhappy first marriages are common,

587] and so is divorce. But after this, the fully adult man or woman can assume a freedom of choice not known since childhood. They may seek second mates, change residence, join a different "mähabär", etc., and the grip of extended family on the individual is somewhat

[885] relaxed by the short life-span of the "elder" grade. This in turn permits the middle-aged adult to be regarded and respected as an elder himself, who not only is permitted a maximum of own choice, but who can and does rule the younger grades.

583 585 1) the eucharistic church marriage, "qurban", engaged in only by a minority, such as some of the nobility, some of the older persons, and all of the priesthood; 2) the kin-negotiated ("civil") marriage, "semanya", sworn before the cheqa shum headman, and most [588] common; 3) the temporary marriage, for which the man engages to pay regular housekeeping wages, "damot", especially common among those who travel to markets.

585 "Semanya" literally means "80", and is thus also called the "eighty-bond marriage". This refers to the oath which includes the phrase "May the Emperor die", perjury against which used to be penalised by what was then the enormous sum of 80 Maria Theresa Thalers. It is also called "kessrai", by "contract"). This is the most common form of marriage, dominated by a complexity of kinship arrangements (described in detail below), and divorce is possible through similar negotiations and "parcelling out" of both goods and children. There is a minimum of individual emphasis in this marriage negotiation, especially in a first marriage, for the kin of both sides must be satisfied and "honored", though there is some element of original choice through informal courtship. The church takes cognizance by sending a priest to bless the couple.

"Qurbān" marriage is not urged by the church on laymen, partly because of the sacerdotal character of the church, partly because the eucharistic sacraments are considered so holy that only serious, [586] mature, fully adult persons are advised to engage in it, and divorce cannot be granted. At this sacrament, the couple is rebaptised, and [587] may, on all church holy days, wear the "aklil" crown. Widows and widowers may remarry, but a priest who becomes a widower is expected to assume monkhood. The priest who blesses a "semanya"

1: Messing E-5 (1953-1954)1957 MP5 Amhara MP5

423 hind on the ancestral lands.
166
361 This succession of events has taken place so often in Amhara history, that very few old settlements have remained on the same
[591] spot for even a century. As a result, many regional varieties of "patrilocal residence" have developed, and even "matrilocal residence" is not excluded, though most bridegrooms would shun such a fate. Also, the land tenure of the Amhara has become complex and replete with litigation, because of the amorphous definition of "gyet", which sometimes emphasizes the consanguineal aspect, sometimes the residential, of kinship after marriage.

B. Problems of the Married Couple and Divorce.

586 When a couple has remained married for a number of years, people say they are "ṭəggə" (lit. coagulated), stuck on each other. For divorce of a first marriage is common as the partners mature.

If her husband neglects her, wanders off, is a drunkard, or beats her too often, a woman may decide to initiate divorce proceedings. A man may do so if she is disobedient, e.g. wanders off to town without his permission.

587 If a man takes a "damos" wife in addition to his "semanya" wife, the latter has no recourse in court. But if he takes another "semanya" wife, she can have him arrested, if she can locate him, for breaking his oath. She then angrily accuses him of doing a stupid thing, "you married one ox hump (shanna) above the other". He may be fined, but his first marriage may still remain valid. If a "semanya" wife hears that her husband has a previous wife, she often laughs, flattered, mocking the other woman by saying: "I married on top of her and not below" - for evidently, the man,

587 knowing both, has preferred her!

[588] A deserted wife, angry that her husband has found another, will often take a lover to buy her "a sheep for Epiphany", butter for her hair, and cotton for her distaff.

578 587 The following relationships are called "gobban", rivals, to each other:

"Semanya" versus "damoz" wife;

Man A, whose divorced wife lives with man B. The men are "gobban".

Woman X, whose divorced husband lives with, or married, woman Y.

"Semanya" and "damoz" wives, versus new concubine, "gäräd", fearing permanency.

One "gäräd" against another, (also called "wushemma").

But only "semanya" wives are regarded as legal rivals.

842 586 When a woman is barren, she may follow the biblical example and ask her husband to take a servant girl, "gäräd" to have children with her. A "semanya" wife may be divorced on grounds of barrenness, but "with honor", taking half of their communal property with her. Amhara peasants believe that women become barren in the towns be-

[588] cause of "loose living". A woman divorced on grounds of barrenness will often have sexual intercourse with many men, hoping that she will conceive and thus have the blame of barrenness taken from her.

848 A bastard, "dicala" has full inheritance rights if his father acknowledges him. Bastards are believed to be of violent tempers, like "Muhammad Gran" (the Galla Muslim chief who devastated much of Ethiopia in the 16th century, reputedly a bastard).

586 When suing for divorce, either partner appeals to the "mänfäs kubä" (colloquially "mänfäs awaq"), the "soul-counselor" priest, who has jurisdiction even over "semanya" marriages. Only he can

586 "damoz" wives and innkeepers, offering bed, board and home comforts
548 to traders and transients. By treating some customers well, they hope to find another husband. When no clients are available, they still earn some income by brewing beer and selling it. They wash themselves and their clothing far more often than peasant women, and pay servants to do the heavy labor and cleaning for them. They leave their children with their kinfolk, sometimes sending money. If she were to remain with her kinfolk herself, family pressure would be great for her to remarry quickly, very likely a more undesirable husband than the first.

587 If and when she does remarry, she usually has few of the social safeguards of her first, virgin marriage. There are no "mis" to protect her, the "manfas gubae" will not be as sympathetic in marital disputes, and the new husband may take her far away from her kinfolk. But by this time she has matured, at least in experience, and is far more capable of protecting her own interests, economically as well as emotionally, than in her first marriage.

5. The Age of Dominance: The Elder:

888 The term "shemagelye" signifies an elder; serious, wise, past the prime of physical strength but more energetic and persistent in determining and commanding human relations, particularly within the residential kin group, than ever before. He is treated with great respect.

887 He is one of the dominant elders who rule the kin group, parcel out land for usufruct to biological family units, make decisions in marriage negotiations and other personal affairs involving the family. In town, they act as judges on higher levels. Among the

834 occasionally affects non-prostitutes also. Arab traders, particularly, like to joke with Coptic Amhara women when the latter come to their stores: such as teasingly to refuse to hand over goods after purchase has been made, or, if the customer finds the price on a desired item too high, suggesting that payment might be made "another way". These fixed stores, located near the daily or Saturday markets, feature luxuries rather than what are considered necessities; e.g. sandals, tea, sugar, raisins, necklaces, imported chocolate, etc. A woman deserted by her husband, or divorced, might succumb. On the other hand, Muslim women are much more segregated from menfolk, so that there is little opportunity for an Amhara male to break the rule with a Muslim female.

836 Virginity ("dempel") is expected of girls at first marriage, which occurs about the age of 14 or 15. If she is found by the husband not to be a virgin, and he feels sure of it and insists on his rights, he can divorce her, or go to court against her kinfolk claiming damages as high as Eth$200 - 300. This is rare, however, for at that age most girls are too young to have had much opportunity for complete sexual

584 intercourse. The courtship, apart from the above-described occasions during watch in the fields and on festives - when they are very formal -, consists of what adults condescendingly and smilingly refer to as "addiarrat", love-whisperings, considered adolescent, during which the boy and girl alternate between childish whisperings and playful hitting at each other. The term is not used for love-making of adults or married couples.

587 Very different is the courtship of the girl after her first divorce, which frequently occurs when her personality matures, often while she is still in her twenties. She prefers an experienced lover.

587 The proverb says:

[539] "He who knows not how to kiss,
his nose he will blow on you."

The divorcée often develops strategy and techniques to win a man of her choice: She may give him a ring to remind him of her when he is away from her; when he visits her, she feeds him "ergo" (thick buttermilk), so he will be sleepy and remain at her house, rather than go to his men friends to gamble. Women have a proverb about men:

[539] "Like a child, (he is attracted) by the ring,
like a cat, (he is attracted) by milk."

If she has a mother who is a good cook, the divorcee will employ this attraction, saying:

[539] "More than the flesh of the daughter,
(he is attracted by)
the butter (i.e. cooking) of the mother."

[832] When this fails, she may enlist the supernatural aid of love amulets, "mistäfaqer", purchased from the däbtära scribe with the man's name inscribed, to inspire love for her in him; and in addition to the fee, may treat the dabtara to beer and sweets to enlist his greatest power on her behalf.

588 If her lover is already married, she may nevertheless establish a "sweetheart" ("wushemma") relationship with him, though she has no claim on "damoz" wages or recognition of this temporary wifehood. This is also one of the few cases in which a woman will try not to have children.

548 588 However, a divorcee who was divorced largely on account of her barrenness - and about 25% of the townswomen are barren at least for some years - will try to have a child, even out of wedlock. She will then very likely join the "unattached women" in the streets inhabited

4: Alvarez M-5 (1520-1526) 1881
MP5 Amhara MP5

586 separated from this husband and married a man more than forty years of age, who is one of the great lords of the court; the title of this one whom she married is Abuquer, and his father Cabeata. This is the greatest lord there is in the court. Thus I saw and knew many of these separations; I have named these because they are of great personages. [587] And because I said that Aaron married the wife of his brother, let not him that reads it be amazed, because it is the usage of the country. [607] They do not think it strange for a brother to sleep with the wife of his brother. This Aaron moreover had sons of her who had been the wife of his brother, and he left her and married another to whom he is now married.

CAP. XXII.—*Of the manner of baptism and circumcision, and how they carry the dead to their burial.*

304 Circumcision is done by anybody without any ceremony, only they say that so they find it written in the books, that God commanded circumcision. And let not the reader of this be amazed—they also circumcise the females as well as the males, which was not in the Old Law. Baptism they do 851 in this manner: they baptize males at forty days, and females at sixty days after their birth, and if they die before they go without baptism. I, many times and in many places, used to tell them that they committed a great error, and went against what the Gospel says: Quod natum est ex carne caro est; et quod natum est ex spiritu spiritus est. They answered me many times that the faith of their mother sufficed for them, and the communion which she received whilst in a state of pregnancy.[1] They perform this baptism

[1] This opinion of the Abyssinians appears to have anticipated the Sorbonne judgment of 1733, given in the 20th chapter of *Tristram Shandy*.

4: Alvarez M-5 (1520-1526) 1881
MP5 Amhara MP5

346 other women do in the church of the apostles, who take it
562 in its place. I always saw the women of the Barnagais go
[644] to the women's church to take the communion with the other women, and I did not see them use the privilege which they say they have, of taking the communion, with one damsel, in the church of the men. The circuits of the churchyards join to one another; they are of very high
796 walls. They make the sacramental bread for both churches in one building, and they say the masses in both churches at the same time, and the priests who serve in one church serve also in the other; that is two thirds of the priests in the men's church, and one third in the women's church, and so they are distributed. These churches have not got tithes, but they have got much land belonging to the priests, and they put it out to profit and divide the revenues of the lands among themselves: the Barnagais gives what is necessary to the churches, such as ornaments, wax, butter, incense in sufficient quantity, and he supplies them with
[792] everything. There may be in these churches twenty priests and always twenty-two friars. I never saw a church of priests which had not got friars, nor a monastery of friars which had got priests; because the friars are so numerous that they cover the world, both in the monasteries as also in the churches, roads, and markets: they are in every place.

CAP. XXVI.—*How the priests are, and how they are ordained, and of the reverence which they pay to the churches and*
793 *their churchyards.*

684 The priests are married to one wife, and they observe the
587 law of matrimony better than the laity: they live in their houses with their wives and children. If their wife should die they do not marry again; neither can the wife, but she

4: Alvarez M-5 (1520-1526) 1881
MP5 Amhara MP5

may become a nun or remain a widow as she pleases. If a 793
priest sleeps with another woman whilst his wife is alive he 684
does not enter the church any more, nor does he enjoy its 587
goods, and remains as a layman. And this I know from having seen a priest accused before the patriarch of having slept with a woman, and I saw that the priest confessed the offence, and the patriarch commanded him not to carry a cross in his hand, nor to enter a church, nor to enjoy the liberties of the church, and to become a layman. If any priests after becoming widowers marry, they remain laymen, As it happened to Abuquer, who married Romana Orque, sister of Prester John, who I have already said was a priest, chief chaplain of Prester John, and he was disordained[1] and made a layman. He no longer enters the church, and receives the communion at the door of the church as a layman, and among the women. The sons of the priests 793
are for the most part priests, because in this country there [871]
are no schools, nor studies, nor masters to teach, and the clergy teach that little that they know to their sons: and so they make them priests without more legitimisation, neither does it seem to me that they require it, since they are legitimate sons. All are ordained by the Abima Markos, for in all the kingdoms of Ethiopia there is no other bishop or person who ordains. The orders are given in two stages, as I will relate further on. I with my own eyes saw them given many times. In all this country the churchyards are [764]
inclosed by very strong walls, that the wild beasts may not disinter the dead bodies. They show them great reverence, [576]
no man riding on a mule passes before a church, even though he is going in a great hurry, without dismounting, until he has passed the church and churchyard a good bit.

[1] *Foy desordenado e feito leigo*; not a correct expression.

8: Rey G-5 (1910-1920)1935
MP5 Amhara MP5

CHAPTER V

SOME OF THEIR HABITS & CUSTOMS—(*continued*)

As the people are Christians they are of course monogamists, but though they have only one wife at a time, they often have, unfortunately for the race, many wives one after the other, and as a natural corollary the women have a series of husbands. This is due to their appallingly lax marriage laws and to the ridiculous facilities for divorce, advantages which do not apply to the Gallas, who "enjoy" two or three or more wives at a time, but then they are not Christians.

Marriage amongst the Abyssinians exists in three forms. Firstly, the man selects a bride, and without any form of ceremony they live together, he supplying her with small amounts of money in addition to a home and the necessaries of life, and when either of them so desires they come to a mutual agreement and separate as easily as they united.

Secondly, there is the civil marriage. In this case there is a contract made before the *Shum* (or "Mayor") when the properties of the would-be bride and bridegroom are specified, and an arrangement is made as to division in case of divorce, though usually they agree to divide things equally. In the event of divorce this division is carried out to the letter, and should there, for example, be amongst other things only one cooking pot, this is halved. When a woman has been "married"

11:Levine Z-4,5 (1958-1961)1965 MP5 Amhara MP5

the Amhara. Both partners enter the marriage with the full understanding that if they do not get along they will be able to separate without much difficulty, each partner taking half the goods that were accumulated during the marriage as well as the land and other private property each brought into the marriage. Only after several years of married life, which have resulted in children, and probably a separation followed by rapprochement or else divorce and remarriage, is the Amhara defined by his culture as a complete adult, a *mulu sēt* or *mulu saw*.

From Generation to Generation

Through the agency of his family of orientation, then, the Amhara adolescent automatically is prepared for adult work responsibilities and launched into married life. Continuity of the social system, however, also depends on the maintenance of a moral order that transcends the narrow commitments of kinship units. What of those sentiments that should dispose the young Amhara to conform with the more general norms of adult society?

The Abyssinian moral order rests primarily upon two pillars: the profession of Christianity and the institution of respect. These dispositions are firmly implanted during childhood and receive steady reinforcement during the transition to adulthood.

Maintenance of the fasting and dietary laws appears to be the central symbol of Christian identity in Amhara culture. Here again one may discern a pattern of progressively increased inculcation of norms throughout maturation. The taboos against pork and other unclean foods are taught at an early age and supported by references to unclean heathens ever after. More important, the Amhara learns step by step how to chasten his stomach in the traditional way. As soon as he is old enough to observe what goes on in his home, he is aware that meat products are not served to anyone on fasting days. Around the age of seven he begins his first regular fast, which means avoiding all food before noon, by observing the sixteen-day fast of *Felsatā*. The Wednesday and Friday fasts are supposed to be observed following this, though in practice it may be a few more years before the child keeps these weekly fasts regularly. Observance of the most trying fast of all, the eight-week fast of Lent, begins at about the age of fifteen.

At the same time, the adolescent comes increasingly under the jurisdiction of a member of the ordained clergy known as his *nafs abbāt* ("soul-father" or confessor). This is particularly so after marriage, when the young man may either continue to be attached to the soul-father of his own father or else may choose another one for himself. (The wife always takes the soul-father of her husband.) The soul-father serves as an agent of moral control by prescribing penance for his confessants when he learns of such infractions of the Christian rules as breaking the fasts.